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Prez gaining ground on contra aid

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan has made "substantial gains" in his campaign to muscle a \$100 million aid package to Nicaraguan rebels through the Democratic-controlled House, sources said last night.

New head counts taken by White House congressional lobbyists indicate that Reagan is within 25 votes of winning next week's House showdown vote on aid to the U.S.-backed contras.

Just last week, Reagan was reported to be trailing by as many as 60 votes, officials said.

"We now believe that a victory is within reach without forcing the President to make any unnecessary compromises," said a senior

White House strategist.

The new head counts came as Reagan announced he was sending U.S. envoy Philip Habib to Central America to promote regional peace talks in advance of Wednesday's vote.

Reagan labeled charges that he is not interested in a peaceful Nicaraguan settlement "ridiculous noises."

Reagan's lobbying strategy for his aid package involves daily presidential statements to Congress on the dangers posed by the Sandinista government.

The President and other senior foreign policy advisers also are barraging wavering members of Congress with classified details about the Soviet

military buildup in Nicaragua.

A New York congressman, who has been undecided on how he will vote, told The Post that officials informed him yesterday that U.S. intelligence agencies discovered a new Soviet shipment of 150 high-performance tanks to Nicaragua earlier this week.

These kinds of details are part of a hardball tactic to warn Democrats of the political risks they could be taking in this election year by voting against the contras and allowing a "new Cuba" to thrive on America's doorstep.

Reagan's decision to send Habib to Central America to promote regional peace talks also won him several Dem-



PHILIP HABIB
Peace envoy.

ocratic votes yesterday.

Reagan announced Habib's departure for El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras at the White House.

"We're going to listen — we'll talk to anyone who has something to offer," he said.

But Reagan pointed out that the U.S. has tried to engage the Sandinistas in negotiations nine times in the past five years and "nine times gotten nowhere."